

Courier Environment Column
Joan Spalding
Oct. 19, 1999

Putting Trees to Bed

The recent snowstorms and the winds have effectively finished what Mother Nature began, the cyclical “needle cast” of the trees. Resident’s who have not lived here long may believe something is wrong with their trees, especially those transplanted this year, when they see the needles turn brown on the inner areas of the branches. This is a cyclical part of the tree growth known as “needle cast” and is a natural part of the tree’s cycle of casting off old needles. Allen Gallamore, District Forester at the Golden Office of the Forest Service believes the early event of needle cast this year is due to the abundant water the trees have received. In any case, this needle drop is natural and part of the tree’s cycle.

Perhaps more of a winter threat to next year’s growth of the trees is the predicted dry, windy winter. Trees which are not protected by a heavy layer of mulch can have their fibrous roots dry out from evapotranspiration which is a fancy word for losing moisture through the wind sucking it out of the ground.

To prevent this from happening, check your new trees to make sure they have at least a 6-8 inch thick mulch covering out to the end of the tree’s branches but six inches away from the trunk to prevent trunk rot. Mature native trees will have natural mulch from the needles and other plant decay. Mulch is available from the local nurseries or from tree sprayers such as LAM tree service who have truckloads from the trees they have removed.

The beetle cycle is over for the year and with the help of the Forest Service and the Colorado State Extension office, homeowners have been able to take preventative measures to save their trees. For example, this year LAM Tree Service sprayed over 27,000 trees and cut down around 3,000.

Mulches also control the soil temperature fluctuations and improve the soil structure and nutrient availability. Mulches should be applied to trees soon after they are transplanted but to protect small bulbs from frost heave and to prevent early emergence, mulch them after the ground is frozen.

Homeowners can also use the winter months in January and February to prune dead branches, making sure they prune only to the branch collar which is a quarter to a half inch from the trunk. The use of black paint over the saw cut is not recommended anymore, because it inhibits the healing and may cause a fungus. For deciduous trees, another preventative measure is to wrap the trunks to prevent frost heave and damage by the elk. The wrapping needs removed in the summer; again for fungus problems, but are a great winter preventative.

In the fall, some trees, because of where they were planted, have to go through a major pruning, a “chopped top and fenders “ desecration by the workers at the utility companies. I often get calls from homeowners who like myself, live next to utility lines. Not only do they have to look at the power lines but the beautiful trees that soften the starkness of the lines look like they been through a army haircut line when the utility workers get through. It seems that some basic lessons from tree experts in how to cut tree branches to follow the lines of the tree rather than the “buzz off “ they get are in order.

While getting our trees ready for winter it’s also time to think about tree planting next year. In the spring, seedlings are available from the Extention Service if you have 2 acres or more or from the National Arbor Day Foundation for a minimum price.

This column is a service of the Evergreen Rotary Club.